

Terminal Crisis

The **Soviet Union** as the world has known it since 1917 is on the brink of collapse. Developments over the week-end should leave little room for doubt on this score. The once omnipresent Communist party has been virtually disbanded. Alongside more and more republics have declared themselves independent. The pace, scope and intensity of these changes, which last week's aborted coup helped to precipitate, suggest that it is only a matter of weeks, if not days, before Lenin's creation irreversibly becomes a thing of the past. Mr Mikhail Gorbachov is still trying to salvage what he can from the debris. His decision to give up his post as general secretary of the CPSU, followed by the **dissolution** of the central committee, the purges in the government and the move to reconstitute the military command *en masse* are desperate bids to avoid the dire denouement. But, with anti-Communist and nationalist fever raging across the sprawling country, his chances of success appear none too bright. Mr Boris Yeltsin is indeed clearly determined to ensure that Mr Gorbachov does not succeed. The President of the Russian Republic is now the master of the situation for all practical purposes. Having seized the initiative in the wake of the coup he is unlikely to fritter away his advantage through half-hearted compromises. In fact as Mr Gorbachov's responsibility for the coup — which he has been quick to acknowledge — becomes the single most vital issue in the on-going struggle for power, he may find that the rush of events overwhelms him as it overwhelmed Kerensky before the Bolsheviks staged their successful revolution.

Mr Gorbachov has been a friend of India and since our independence the **Soviet Union** has stood by us in all our moments of need. It has backed the developing countries in their struggle against those forces which sought to dominate them. Therefore, what is happening in that country today cannot but shock and dismay us. Yet whatever may have been the government's compulsions to react the way it did to Mr Gorbachov's ouster and later to his abrupt if partial rehabilitation, Indian public opinion, with the exception of the two mainstream Communist parties, will not shed tears for the demise of the "socialist fatherland." Neither its elimination of landlordism nor its heroic riposte to Nazi aggression, nor its undeniable successes in the scientific, technological and educational fields, nor even its rise to the status of the second most powerful country in the world can detract attention from the horrors the Communist regime perpetrated in the name of utopian ideals. The millions of people killed during the forcible collectivisation of land; the fear, intimidation, torture and terror used to keep the population on a tight leash; the systematic offensive against religious institutions; the forcible integration of non-Russian nationalities into the Union, and last but not least a dismal economic record, all this constitutes a saga of monumental pain and suffering. It takes a particularly perverted sense of values to believe that the horrendous crimes, the appalling sacrifices at the altar of abstractions ("ending man's exploitation of man") were justified.

Since developments in the **Soviet Union** during the past one week have stunned us repeatedly, we simply cannot afford to hazard a guess of the shape of things to come. Already, however, it is clear that it will be impossible to stop the ever burgeoning movement in favour of democracy in all the republics of the Union. For the present at least the passage to the pluralistic political set-up involves the disintegration of the Communist party. In the second place no force of earth can now prevent those republics wishing to secede from the Union from doing so. As they unfold, these two processes are quite likely to let loose ugly forces of anarchism, chauvinism, anti-Semitism and plain hoodliganism. The absence of well-structured parties could well create a vacuum which only chaos may fill. All the same there is precious little that the outside world can do to influence the course of events. What is dying before our very eyes is not only a political entity but an entire ideology which has dominated ideas, values and beliefs throughout the world for a greater part of the 20th Century. For better or for worse, the **Soviet Union** indeed was a reference point, a central paradigm, in every critical intellectual debate. Its disappearance is bound to leave even those who were thoroughly disillusioned with it somewhat unhinged. But there can be no remorse for the passing away of the totalitarian order.